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## DISCUSSION.

### REMARKS ON TICKLING AND LAUGHING.

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BY HIRAM M. STANLEY.

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The interesting article on tickling and laughing in the October AMERICAN JOURNAL OF PSYCHOLOGY suggests some further remarks on the explanation of these phenomena, in a somewhat different order, and to remark upon some points little or not at all noticed by that article.

The question of the *rationale* of tickling involves: Why does this light contact so generally and acutely excite? Why does it issue in laughter?

As to the first question, "the strange sensitiveness to minimal tactile impressions" that "has never been explained," this is in the article explained by survival and revival of "the oldest stratum of psychic life," that is, of primitive touch experience when there was "no sense of gradual approach." The revival theory is a valuable one, but it appears to me that ticklishness implies tentacular experience. By temporary self-extensions even low amoeboid organisms have slight but suggestive touch experiences that stimulate very general and violent reactions, and in higher organisms extended touch organs, as tentacle, antenna, hair, etc., become permanent and very delicately sensitive organs, where minimal contacts have very distinct and powerful reactions. Tentacular experience forms the main phase of psychic life for a considerable time in biologic history, and constitutes a psychic age which is very little understood. We come nearest to it, perhaps, when groping about in the dark in a strange place and surrounded by totally unknown objects. We are then all touch, and the slightest contact induces strong though indefinite fears and activities. This ticklishness, as agitation at minimal contact, is survival of long past ancestral tentacular experience.

But the difficulty here occurs how and why tickling should be pleasurable. It is certainly evident that the function of stimulating minimal contacts has been chiefly evolved as painful agitation, intense alarm and violent efforts at flights; and that survivals and revivals *per se* can only be the same in nature. Yet we know that tickling now causes spasms of

keenest pleasure, and hence, if it is survival, it must point to some other form than the minimal contact agitation developed in the struggle of existence. And this other form we believe to be play activity. For what is play in its simplest and earliest form but a light touching in a mimic alarming? The earliest seems to be tag; and I have seen a school of fish ("suckers") thus engaged, one fish nipping slightly and playfully the tail of another, and then swimming fast away to be chased playfully by the other. The pleasurable of tickling, then, is in its playfulness and as reviving a vast mass of ancestral play experience. As Darwin remarks ("Expression of the Emotions," p. 201), "a young child, if tickled by a strange man, would scream from fear." That is, here the revival is toward the minimal contact experience of direct utility in the struggle of existence, rather than toward play activity.

This of course merely throws the problem further back, and we have yet to inquire as to the nature and *rationale* of play activity and its pleurability. All activities from the psychic side may be divided into two grand divisions: playful and serious; and it is extremely remarkable how far down in life this distinction runs. Even low microscopic organisms have seemed to some observers to give evidence of playfulness. But play is, psychologically speaking, quite complex; as shamming for its own sake it is evidently so enjoyed by almost the whole range of living beings without reference to life values, and thus seems the primary æsthetic element. Play is appearance as opposed to reality, or rather reality putting on appearance. To ascribe play to mere overflow of energy helps but little, for we must ask, why, under natural evolution, should superabundant energy be generated. Is not this directly opposed to the law of economy which prevails in all evolution under competition and the struggle of existence? But if energy becomes superabundant, it will flow out the usual channel in the usual way, and so an irascible creature will expend this energy in fighting, *i. e.*, serious activity, which, indeed, we often see. Mere superfluity of energy does not explain why the usual activity should be used, but in a playful manner, *e. g.*, not in fighting, but in playing at fighting. Mere superfluous energy leads the puppy to bite, not play at biting; that is, playfulness is purely a mental quality, for which mere amount of nervous energy cannot account.

For the psychic basis of the pleurability of play we may perhaps find a clue in guile. Guile and play are both assumptions of expression, but guile is earnest method in the struggle of existence in the forms of mimicry, cunning,

strategy, etc., whereas play is foolery for its own sake. Yet the pleasure in this foolery is probably derived from the exultation in successful deceit which has marked the evolution of life. Play in the primitive form is playing a trick. Play is thus feigning. One puppy feigns anger, growling, chasing, biting; and the other, feigning fear, flees. Here is mutual duplicity, and mutually understood as such, acted out for the sheer pleasure of the activity—æsthetic action,—and thus a most marvelously complex psychosis for low orders of life. Yet to fool and act the fool seems equally pleasant in the play of young animals; the pursuer and the fugitive both enjoy their pretence. However, we may well suppose that play was at first one-sided, and that the acting the fool is comparatively late evolution. We often observe such one-sided play. I have noticed a large dog which enjoys putting little dogs into a genuine scare and flight by a sudden great bark. The reciprocity of complete play does not enter here, nor yet in the case of a cat playing with a mouse. All teasing is one-sided play. How reciprocity came to be established is a difficult point; possibly as a mode of defense.

To account for play-pleasure by reference to pleasure of deceit, certainly covers many cases, and those the very crude ones of "horse play," practical jokes, fooleries, and masqueradings of all kinds. It also may cover what the article calls "Laughter at the Naïve and Unconscious," since the naïve means being "fresh," "green," "gullible."

The relation of play to higher modes like wit and humor is apparent in that surprise and contrast underlie all three. Surprise is a method of attack which is most successful in the struggle of existence, and hence most pleasurable. So the pleasure of playing in its keenest form is that of surprise, which, when cultivated for its own sake in a purely mental way, as suggested by word and action, enters into both wit and humor. And the physiological side of surprise is shock, sudden and violent agitation. Tickling is organic surprise in that there is unexpectedness as to localization. Other senses than touch may have a sort of tickling. Thus may not the sudden popping before an infant's eyes of some object, as in playing peek-a-boo, be a tickling of eye sensation? The 'peek' startles the eye, the 'boo' the ear, and the play-pleasure expresses itself in crowing laughter. I have observed a child of nine months express its merriment at a gurgling noise by a squeal made during inspiration. Snuff-taking is a nostril tickling.

Contrast is a fundamental element in play. All play is an apprehension of and delight in the contrast between the real and unreal. In one direction this culminates in

comedy, in the opposite in tragedy. There is a continuous evolution from the puppy mimicking anger to Jefferson personating Rip Van Winkle. The whole range of play is fictional and imaginative. Every action may be acted, every feeling and thought may be fictionally expressed. But play is most prominent on those levels of life which have been fully integrated. Thus the dog does not play in the forms of activity which men have taught him, as in drawing loads, but reverts to wolfish action. The most progressive forms of human activity are rarely used as play forms. There is more sport in hunting than in writing papers on psychology. Men play with the past, and that is where the main field for art lies. Those who interpret an age to itself do it in a sober, business-like, realistic, earnest way which is hardly play. The height of severest endeavor by which a race is at present progressing is not an inviting field for its play activity. Play is the outgrown clothes in which humanity still likes to masquerade.

Whether the laugh at injury to another may be related to play is perhaps questionable. And yet we know that getting another at a disadvantage is a prime joy in competitive existence, and is continually played at. The laughter excited in us at the sight of a man chasing his hat down the street is probably related to play activity and playful exultation over disadvantage to another. (A somewhat completer discussion of play will be found in my "Evolutionary Psychology of Feeling," pp. 298, 350, 364.)

But we come to the further question why the pleasurable agitation of tickling, sensuous and mental, should issue in laughter: how does the peculiar action of diaphragm, lungs and vocal organs which we term laughter, arise? and why is this reaction confined to human beings? Thus in playing hide-and-seek with a dog, when he suddenly comes upon you he will express his delight in joyful barking, while a child in like case will break into hearty laughter. Now the rise and progress of laughter in the human being is, I think, to be connected with the rise and progress of articulate expression of which it is but one mode. In fact, we may define laughter as articulate merriment. At any rate, in a very broad but real sense, the hearty laughter of a civilized human adult may be termed articulate in comparison with animal and infantile expressions. If this be a real clew we should expect that those savage tribes whose language is largely composed of clicks, will have little capacity for laughing of the European type. That is a point which is worth looking into, and the whole subject of race and language as bearing on laughter is yet to be explored in any thorough manner. The method of

laughter with the deaf and dumb should also be studied. The growth of laughter in relation to articulate expression in general in infants must also be thoroughly investigated. It seems probable that laughter is an articulate development from the shout or crow of pleasure, and sobbing likewise from the scream and howl of pain. An indication of this is that in the height of pleasure and pain, when we might expect expression to revert to primitive form, laughing often ends in shouts, and sobbing in agonized wailing. Further, Mr. W. S. Landor observed that on occasions when a European would laugh, an Ainu would be apt to shout with pleasure. Thus, laughter may be considered a reduplicated and articulated shouting. Laughter, once established as a mode of pleasure expressions, expresses tickling. However, the better position is that tickling pleasure as reminiscent of ancestral play is expressed articulately in man by laughter as the original mode, other forms being later. Again, as a cause of laughter, we may suggest that the tickling stimulates and sets up violent motor response, as in the joyous play activities of chasing and fleeing, but when this external response, as running, is not carried out, this tickling cumulates the internal response in lung actions, diaphragm, etc. Laughter is a panting. In short, the organism reacts like a "racing" engine.

It is interesting to note that the laughable does not equal the pleasurable, that laughter has not come to be expression for pleasure in general, but only for certain kinds of pleasure, and those rather slight and frivolous. The strongest and most exciting amusements, as horse-racing, football, prize-fighting, induce the keenest pleasure in skill and in the joy of success in combat and competition—under conditions of the struggle of existence this joy of successful conflict being by the very nature of evolution the greatest and deepest—and yet laughter is not found here. Laughter is essentially a minor affair and implies a certain careless objectivity as opposed to vital subjective interest. So duplicity is not laughable in matters of the highest import. Military strategy does not excite laughter, but the strategy of a negro in robbing a hen-roost may seem highly laughable. All which points to the conclusion that laughing is born of play, and is mainly and fundamentally playful throughout its whole evolution even to the latest forms of mental play.

As to the method of investigation, the *questionnaire* mode of popular reports is evidently a crude and very tentative form. This method is scarcely used by any science but psychology; biology, physics and other sciences collect their facts not from general observations sent in by the untrained or half-trained observers, but wholly by the direct studies of expert

scientific observers. A geological or geographical explorer can depend but little on the reports of the natives. The science of mind is certainly not less difficult than others, and as common sense fails elsewhere, so also here. Science in all directions is the correcting of common sense by deepest insight unaffected by ordinary utility. Hence, if the *questionnaire* method is worth working at all, it is only as a bare preliminary, simply as pointing out salient points for research. To secure any results of high value on the psychology of laughter would require the continuous service of several thoroughly trained and able psychologists who should work independently for several years and publish independent monographs. These men should be good physiologists, and should have a decided *penchant* for their work, and above all, have acute psychological insight in quickly and accurately realizing the states of mind implied by the most various activities. Their studies should be chiefly directed not upon observation of the very complex phenomena of laughter in civilized adults, but in the study of the evolution of laughter with infants and savages. Combined phonographic-photographic records of evolution of laughter with infants would be valuable. Pure savagery is fast fading from the globe, and the most pressing need for evolutionary psychology to-day, is a thorough study of the savage by psychologists of really eminent insight. Various scientific associations, biologic and others, send explorers and collectors to all parts of the earth, and it is high time that psychological associations do the same, and also provide a psychologist to go with all general scientific expeditions.